

## COMMUNICATING WITH EXTERNAL CUSTOMERS - ABS

(Meeting on marketing and data dissemination - Washington, 4/5 April 2000)

### Some Background

Communication is so all pervasive that it is often difficult understanding what the real issues are and where to start to address them. It is also the mainstay of effective marketing, has been for years and will continue to be, as statistical organisations embrace the latest technologies and the powerful opportunities that accompany them for improving interaction with our customers. In addition, statistical agencies cannot escape the fact that they are dealing with very complex markets and equally complex products - this adds to the communication challenge.

2. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) periodically asks its external customers about communication issues. Market research is of course critical in achieving some structured feedback from clients. In recent times ABS has tended to focus its market research on service streams, e.g. our telephone inquiry service, information consultancy service and media service although we have undertaken some wider research in respect of Census outputs and electronic dissemination. Some examples of feedback from various market research are:

- . "Clients largely happy with communications, but some concern due to telephone skills of ABS staff and efforts to keep clients informed;
- . Clients concerned about inflexibility and inconsistency of communication;
- . Most clients very happy with ABS communication and service;
- . Communication in general seen as poor, with lack of clarity and recognition of clients and inconsistent approaches to clients; and
- . ABS does not speak industry language"

3. Some recurring themes over the years include:

- . concerns about and lack of understanding of ABS user charging - often created a barrier for more constructive communication.
- . clients understand what they currently get from the ABS but are unaware of overall ABS capability and what they may be able to get;
- . difficulties in knowing the right area to contact in the ABS; and
- . uncertainty about whether the ABS really listens to what clients have to say.

4. While undoubtedly current and future technologies will enable further improvements to be made in communication generally I was struck by the following finding in respect of customer loss - from a recent CRM seminar I attended :

- . 1% die
- . 3% move away
- . 5% develop other relationships
- . 9% leave for competition
- . 14% leave because dissatisfied with products/services
- . 68% leave because they have encountered an attitude of indifference as they are being served

5. Making continuing efforts to reduce the 68% factor is critical from a marketing perspective and, I suggest, an important consideration for any communication improvement initiative.

## **The ABS Client Service Plan - a framework for communication improvement**

6. During 1996 ABS developed a Client Service Plan aimed at providing a framework for improved marketing and client service. As part of this plan ABS emphasised the following objectives and strategies relating to communication improvement:

- . **Clearly understand the demands and diversity of the market for ABS services**
  - . research the ABS market segments to better understand their needs;
  - . obtain regular feedback on client information needs for statistics, service delivery preferences and satisfaction levels with ABS services; and
  - . improve systems for analysing internal ABS wide intelligence about client purchases, problems, needs and preferences.
- . **Align ABS marketing and client service efforts to market segment needs**
  - . develop output dissemination plans for the various fields of statistics;
  - . promote and sell the full range of appropriate ABS services; and
- . **Substantially improve general market awareness of ABS services**
  - . promote the availability of basic statistics and relevant related information on public access networks;
  - . implement a corporate image and branding strategy for all ABS communications and services;
  - . develop and implement an overall promotional strategy which raises client awareness of ABS data range and capability; and
  - . develop segment-based communication and promotional strategies to raise awareness of the ABS as a source of essential and authoritative quality information.
- . **Continually improve service delivery to ABS clients**
  - . investigate opportunities provided by advances in information and communications technologies to better meet client needs.

7. Prior to this ABS had tried a number of initiatives to improve communication with clients generally. These ranged from running a Quality Client Service program where all ABS staff were provided with some fundamental service training, including a focus on good communication (especially listening), through rationalising the contact points across the organisation, arranging for professional seminars for particular market sectors and moving early into relationship management of our major clients ( supported with client and account managers).

### **What is happening at present?**

8. Customers are not homogeneous of course and one of the platforms of the ABS Client Service Plan was to formalise a broad market segmentation as follows:

- . Key Clients ( made up of lifeline, strategic and other big value clients)
- . Subscribers ( those who want regular, consistent, no nonsense business arrangements)
- . Ad Hoc ( those who only use ABS periodically in some form or other)

Specialist ( eg. Education, Media, Libraries)

9. A brief summary on how we are trying to communicate better with these respective segments follows:

### **Key Clients**

10. A strong relationship management approach is being adopted with this segment. The Key Client Segment comprises about 200 clients across Australia. The majority of organisations which currently fall within the Key Client Segment are Commonwealth or State Government agencies. One thing that typifies this group is that there is often extensive contact between various parts of the organisation and various parts of ABS on matters relating to statistical developments, collection needs, data reporting and service provision and evaluation. This may take the form of one on one contact with statistical experts, via the information and statistical consultancy services or through the National Information (telephone) Service. Part of the communication challenge is to try and make sure that our communication is professional, consistent and reasonably well coordinated. This segment receives high priority for marketing and client service activities and contributes significantly as participants in many statistical user groups run by the ABS and/or priority and advisory committees that exist at the National and State level.

11. Each Lifeline Client ( 16 across Australia and typically the various Treasury's and major policy Departments) is allocated a Senior Executive Service Lifeline Manager from the ABS who is responsible for :

- . becoming knowledgeable about the Lifeline Client's core functions and responsibilities and the key individuals responsible for implementing them;
- . gauging whether the client's statistical requirements are being matched by the appropriate level of ABS corporate capability and service provision;
- . ensuring that the client's input is sought during various collection reviews, etc;
- . acting as an advocate for the interests of the Lifeline Client; and
- . monitoring the level of client servicing provided by the ABS over time - including the client's history of acquisition of relevant products and services from the ABS.

12. Support for these activities is provided by an ABS officer outposted to work in the agency, where one exists, and by a client manager who will operate from ABS and look after a number of organisations. Some support initiatives include the development of a key client tracking facility, the active support and servicing of statistical networks, the facilitation of "health of the relationship" assessments, etc.

13. Client managers also play an important role in communicating with the strategic and other high value clients, arranging regular visits to key personnel, acting as a point of contact/sounding board in ABS, keeping an eye on the general interaction between ABS and the particular client as well as introducing new services and products on a personal basis. Most Offices also produce Statistical Newsletters for these clients, which vary in content, depending on the interests of the clients in the particular State or Territory.

14. ABS is about to roll out a new service to Key Clients (ABS@). This service will deliver the complete collection of ABS outputs ( publications, time series and special data sets and associated information resources - all linked to each other) to every desktop in a key client organisation. It will also provide links to the ABS Website where our general capability is presented and include a component for enabling improved feedback and general interaction. The service, which will be an intranet based one, will also be used to pilot a development in Customer Managed Relationship interest profiling, which will lead to fine tuning the service to provide improved one-to-one servicing. As part of the service development strategy a number of early pilots were set up where clients have been able to test the technical aspects of the service and also provide feedback to the ABS on their specific content needs for the final product. This has proved to be a good way of demonstrating ABS

interest in providing solutions which meet the clients' special needs.

## **Subscribers**

15. The annual product subscription renewal process, What Figures (ABS's main promotional vehicle distributed in hard copy and on the web), Census Update, (our Census promotional vehicle) our Web Site and a range of statistical directories and catalogues are the primary awareness raising facilities for this group. Many subscribers also use the National Information Service and/or are regular users of the Information Consultancy service. We have recently introduced an email delivery service as an alternative to receiving hard copy publications via the mail. As well as providing more timely access this service provides ABS with the opportunity to improve communication with subscribers.

16. Some work is also proceeding on the more effective analysis of our subscribers, looking at fundamental recency, frequency and value profiles in the interest of improving our database marketing arrangements. It is expected over time that we will fine tune the new "AusStats" service to obtain interest profiles of subscribers via the internet and move more to a one-to-one approach in alerting clients of new offerings, via email, in their particular fields of interest.

## **Ad-Hoc**

17. Ad - hoc clients, by design, have received the lowest priority in terms of planned marketing and communication initiatives. Many of them avail themselves of the Website, access our information via the media or libraries or infrequently use the NIS and/or Information Consultancy Service. We maintain a presence at a number (small) of conferences and trade shows, usually with a staffed stall and often a speaker and a number of consultants participating in the audience. As ABS moves into ad hoc e-commerce we expect to be able to take advantage of the internet environment to capture relevant information about more of our Ad Hoc clients and to keep them better informed in the future.

## **Specialist**

### ***Media***

18. A great deal of effort is put into making sure ABS communicates well with the media, and perhaps more than other sectors, relationship and trust are most important components of this communication. Improvements in preparing media releases to support the publications have been ongoing and combined with their availability now on the Web, have been well received by the media.

19. Most journalists, particularly those who deal with ABS on a regular basis, hold us in very high regard. A recent study also identified a number of areas where we can consider some fine-tuning and new approaches for media liaison.

20. Key findings from the study included:

- Overall, the ABS is viewed by most core users as a credible, professional organisation that delivers quality products.
- Generally, the specific journalist-oriented products and services (news releases, publications to the media, media liaison and assistance with enquires) are well rated, especially amongst core users, for being reliable, although the time lag on some statistics are too long from the media's perspective.
- Customer interaction is not seen as consistently strong throughout the ABS. This reflects the variety of ways which media accesses ABS services.
- Some fringe users, and non-users, are potential core users but our ABS media unit and website profile needs raising with them.
- Core users (Canberra Press Gallery) are very satisfied with current product delivery and there is no groundswell of demand for ABS products to be delivered via the internet or email. However, non-core users and fringe users value such dissemination methods.
- The ABS is not perceived by some journalists as a particularly dynamic, innovative organisation.

21. Recent developments in communicating with and through the media include the use by some journalists of links from their on-line articles directly to the main features of the publication they are referring to on the ABS Website and the use of sound grabs ( wave files) on the media releases on the Web Site which have been picked up and used by the radio networks. While these are innovative and take advantage of today's technology the media in Australia currently tend to place more store on tried and true dissemination approaches such as the hard copies of ABS publications and media briefings, consultation with the ABS expert, etc.

### ***Education***

22. ABS has a National Education Services unit which is primarily responsible for improving communication with the Schools. Initiatives have included the production of a tailored "Stats Pak" catalogue highlighting material which should be of interest to school curricula (now available on the Web) and some Web based resource material from different statistical fields.

23. In addition a client manager has recently been allocated to the University sector to steer the introduction of an arrangement for improved access to Confidentialised Unit Record Files and assist with ongoing discussions and negotiations for the introduction of a second arrangement involving university access to the new AusStats service. This will potentially provide access to around 700,000 university staff and students to all ABS publications, time series, special data sets, meta data, etc at their desktops.

24. ABS communication with and understanding of the Education sector has improved considerably as a result of the above initiatives.

### ***Libraries***

25. ABS has a longstanding record of close and ongoing communication with the library sector, particularly relating to the Library Extension Program (LEP), whereby ABS publications are placed in over 500 libraries around the country. Frequent attendance by the Chief Librarian and his staff at library conferences and the like, representation on various committees and the training of large numbers of librarians who support the LEP are all valuable channels for effective communication with the sector.

## **OTHER**

26. In addition to the above ABS has national client managers allocated to the Finance Sector and the Market Research and Management Consultancy Sector. Their primary role is to maintain contact with major clients in the sector and to keep the sector informed of ABS developments of interest to them, and the ABS informed of developments, issues, etc that may impact on our relationship with those sectors. This arrangement has worked well over the last 4-5 years.

27. Communicating with the private sector generally presents a range of challenges. In addition to the client manager approach for specific sectors mentioned above we are giving far more consideration now to how we can work more effectively with our secondary distributors, sales agents and business and industry associations in the interests of having ABS output and services presented in the language that the different industry sectors understand.

28. Recent initiatives with the universities will also play a part in improving general awareness of ABS output and services and helping to improve understanding on the part of both the ABS and organisations in the various sectors.

29. Most recently we have concentrated on changing the focus of various promotion programs and vehicles to awareness raising of ABS wide capability rather than individual products and services. In support of the latter some of our traditional promotional vehicles (What Figures and Census Update) have been refocussed and our various offices have tried new ways of demonstrating our capability. These have included running regular showcases for clients in the ABS office and taking our product and service range to client organisations. We recently held a statistical expo in one of the State Offices where our dissemination directions, service developments and general capability were presented to the audience and they were then given time to visit a number of stalls to discuss

particular product or service offerings - this seemed to work well as it really did give the ABS the opportunity to communicate with the clients rather than to them.

30. The National Information Service has recently evolved through the centralisation of the 8 separate telephone inquiry services around Australia and the opportunity is being taken to improve our servicing and channelling of clients who use this system. Improving our understanding of specific client needs and making sure we offer a range of solutions is an important consideration in the development of new processes associated with the NIS.

## **The Future**

31. Our major focus for the future will be to intensify our development of client interest profiles and the subsequent "pushing" of information of particular relevance to them. In addition we will focus on achieving the best possible cross linking of our various products and components in the interests of promoting awareness of total ABS capability.

## **SUMMARY**

32. Communicating with external customers presents many challenges for a statistical agency such as the ABS. ABS has tried a range of different approaches to improving communication, involving hard copy publications, brochures, presentations, and most recently the Web. The ABS decentralised organisation provides a very good platform for communicating in person with a wide range of customers. This also brings with it some other issues in making sure that internal communication is strong and consistent - the topic of separate papers for this meeting.

33. The overriding challenge of demonstrating real interest in a client, rather than indifference remains high, particularly as we move further to self help facilities and remain in an environment of multiple service delivery points. While technology offers some possible solutions to this challenge, indications in Australia at present are that many ABS clients associate interest with personal contact and achieving the right balance between technology and personal interaction will remain an important consideration for some time to come.

34. There have been a number of important lessons learnt in ABS as we have progressed our marketing and communication efforts. The main ones include:

- . Focus market research on discreet service streams to get a clear understanding of client views
- . The desirability of concentrating on wider capability in interacting with clients rather than on specific products or services.
- . Strive for consistency in communication across client touch points
- . Understand the significance of "indifference" in influencing clients' willingness to communicate with ABS
- . The importance of some underlying framework on which to base communication improvement with a heterogeneous market place
- . The benefits of good and consistent corporate imaging
- . The importance of strong relationship management, particularly for major clients
- . The value of pursuing continuous improvement in customer communication in workable chunks
- . The danger of assuming that you 'have it right' already.
- . The potential benefits in using intermediaries to communicate with sectors in the context and language they really understand
- . The importance of achieving the right balance between interacting in person and by technology.

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